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WHO SAVED ISRAEL IN 1947?

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The usual answer is Truman—but it could just as easily be Stalin. In fact, thanks to Zionist diplomacy, it was both; and therein lies a lesson for the Jewish state today.

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November 29 marks the 70th anniversary of UN General Assembly resolution 181, recommending the partition of Mandate Palestine into two separate Jewish and Arab states. On that day in 1947, millions of listeners sat glued to their radio sets to follow the voting. The outcome set off spontaneous celebrations among Zionists everywhere, for it constituted the first formal international endorsement of a Jewish state.

A truck with the faces of Soviet Communist leaders Lenin and Stalin at the labor day parade held in Tel Aviv on May 1, 1949. Pinn Hans/Israeli Government Press Office.

To celebrate the anniversary, Israel's embassy to the United Nations is restoring the hall in Flushing Meadows, New York—today the main gallery of the Queens Museum, then the meeting place of the General Assembly—to its appearance in 1947. The announced plan is to reenact the vote, with the current ambassadors of member states that voted "yes" recasting their ballots.

The most conspicuous of the ballots cast will be that of the United States. Indeed, the vote and its sequel are set to be told as a largely American story. Israel's UN ambassador, Danny Danon, has placed the celebration in this historical context:

> From the moment President Truman became the first world leader to recognize the new Jewish state, Israel has had no better friend than the United States of America, and the U.S. has had no more steadfast ally than the state of Israel.

In keeping with this, the keynote speaker in New York will be U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence. Again and again, we are likely to hear how Harry Truman stood up to his State Department (and, perhaps less heroically, catered to Jewish voters) by saying "yes" in November 1947 and then by immediately recognizing Israel when David Ben-Gurion declared the state on May 14, 1948. And once again, we will be reminded of Eddie Jacobson, Truman's Jewish business partner in a Kansas City haberdashery before the Depression, who famously traded on his old friendship to secure a critical meeting between Truman and the Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann in March 1948.

The rest of the story has been carefully burnished over the years, including by Truman himself. In 1953, when Jacobson introduced the former president to a Jewish audience as "the man who helped create the state of Israel," Truman upped the ante by comparing himself with the ancient Persian ruler who restored the Jews to Jerusalem from Babylonian exile: "What do you mean 'helped to create'? I am Cyrus."

Historians, it is true, still debate Truman's motives. But they also agree on one thing: Israel's creation owed more to Truman than to any other world leader. "Without Truman," write Allis and Ronald Radosh in their book on Truman and Israel, "the new state of Israel might not have survived its first difficult years, and succeeded thereafter." Michael J. Cohen, in his earlier book on Truman and Israel, states that in 1947 and 1948, "Truman arguably played the decisive diplomatic role in the birth of the new state of Israel." Michael Oren, in *Power, Faith, and Fantasy*, his bestseller on America in the Middle East, asserts that Truman's comparison of himself with the Persian ruler Cyrus "was not entirely bluster."

The problem here is simple: everything said about the contribution of Truman could be said about that of Joseph Stalin.

I. Stalin, a Founding Father of Israel?

In a 1998 essay marking Israel's 50th anniversary, the historian Paul Johnson addressed a "paradoxical aspect of the Zionist miracle, which we certainly did not grasp at the time and which is insufficiently understood even now." That paradox, wrote Johnson, is that "among the founding fathers of Israel was Joseph Stalin." Twenty years later, even fewer people grasp it. The Soviet Union is long gone, remembered by Israel and its supporters as the patron of Nasser abroad, the jailer and tormentor of Jews at home, the purveyor of vicious anti-Semitism everywhere. Nor did any Soviet leader himself ever claim the mantle of Cyrus. To

the contrary: from the 1950s onward, the Soviet Union did its utmost to erase the fact of Soviet support for the creation of Israel from official history and from Arab memory.

Meanwhile, both in the United States and in Israel, an equal and opposite process has erased from memory the inconstancy of *American* support for Israel's creation.

Yes, the U.S. voted for partition in November 1947, but by the following March it had declared partition impossible to implement and proposed a "temporary" UN trusteeship in its stead. On the very eve of Britain's official withdrawal from Israel the following May, America's top diplomat was still warning Israel's leaders against declaring independence.

> **It is a "paradoxical aspect of the Zionist miracle," wrote the historian Paul Johnson, "that "among the founding fathers of Israel was Joseph Stalin."**

Yes again, Truman did immediately recognize Israel (*de facto* but not *de jure*). But he had already enforced an arms embargo on the Middle East, forcing Israel to scavenge for its survival.

By contrast, not only did the Soviet Union under Stalin vote for partition, and also recognize Israel—the first state to do so *de jure,* three days after independence—it had come out in favor of a Jewish state well before the United States. Moreover, it had held firm in that support both before and after the vote, and had indirectly assured that the newborn state would have the war materiel it desperately needed to defend itself. According to Abba Eban, Israel's first UN ambassador, without the Soviet vote in favor of partition (together with the votes of four satellite nations), and without the arms provided by the Soviet bloc, "we couldn't have made it, either diplomatically or militarily."

Still, one might wonder: even if all this is true, is any contemporary purpose served by recounting it? That purpose certainly cannot be to "rehabilitate" Stalin's Soviet Union. Although there is such a tendency in Russia today, few outside that country harbor any illusions about Stalin's horrific legacy. Nor can the purpose be to belittle the significance of American support for Israel since 1967.

In what follows, my objective is otherwise: to show how, in the years just before, during, and after the establishment of the state of Israel, its leaders thought creatively about the postwar geopolitical order. Knowing that they had no steady friends, they presciently identified the Soviet Union as an emerging great power, and set about wooing Moscow. Soviet support then allowed them to parlay budding cold-war rivalries into even more American support. It was a masterstroke of Zionist diplomacy.

Stalin's decision is still shrouded in mystery, and it is by no means certain that Zionist

overtures played the decisive role in the Soviet Union's surprising and highly consequential support for a Jewish state. But they might have done. Today, as Israel makes its way in a changing world, marked by the rise of new powers, there may be a lesson to be learned from this history.

It all began with a forgotten speech.

II. A Forgotten Speech That Shocked the World

Shortly before midday on May 14, 1947, Andrei Gromyko, the permanent representative of the Soviet Union to the United Nations, mounted the dais of the UN General Assembly Hall in Flushing Meadows, Queens.

At that moment, the mood of Zionists everywhere was one of gloom. They were still reeling from the magnitude of the Holocaust, the images from the Nazi extermination camps, and the plight of hundreds of thousands of survivors who had emerged dazed from the camps and the forests. The vast majority of these Jews wanted only to leave Europe, and many were embarking on long treks to Mediterranean ports in hopes of gaining passage to Palestine. A quarter-million Jews filled displaced-persons camps in Germany and Austria, desperate for a positive response to their pleas and safe passage to the Jewish homeland.

In Palestine, thanks to a British policy designed to appease the Arabs, the doors remained as firmly shut to Jewish immigration as they had been all through the war. The Royal Navy, intercepting ships headed for Palestine with their human cargo of Jewish survivors, shipped the "illegals" to grim detention camps in Cyprus. Some Palestinian Jews reacted to these draconian measures by taking up arms in an insurgency against the British, setting off a cycle of killings and retributions. Others appealed to the world's conscience, with limited results. Although the yishuv, the organized Jewish population in Palestine, had prepared itself for independence, no great power had declared itself in favor of a Jewish state.

In February 1947, Britain announced that it would terminate its Mandate and refer the problem of Palestine to the United Nations. In May, the UN General Assembly moved to create a special commission, the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP), whose job was to "ascertain the facts" and recommend a "solution to the problem of Palestine."

> **Although the Jews in Palestine had prepared themselves for independence, no great power had come out in favor of a Jewish state. On May 14, 1947, with a speech by the Soviet representative to the UN, that suddenly changed.**

This was the immediate background to the May 14 speech by Andrei Gromyko defining the brief of UNSCOP from the Soviet perspective. No Zionist had reason to expect much of it. The Soviet Union had always derided Zionism as a reactionary if not a fascist movement, and a catspaw of Western and especially British imperialism. Since the war's end, the Soviets had maintained that the "Jewish problem" could be resolved not by moving Jews to Palestine but only by "the complete eradication of the roots of fascism" in Europe itself. Communist parties across the Middle East, including in Palestine, dismissed the notion of partition as an imperialist plot. The party line instead urged "a single, democratic, independent Palestine"—in which Arabs would outnumber Jews two to one.

At thirty-seven, Gromyko was already a seasoned Soviet diplomat and a former ambassador to Washington. A British admirer in the UN bureaucracy described him as "dour and gruff in demeanor." Zionist diplomats and American Jewish leaders, who knew him well, had no illusions about this "thunderer," as they called him (*grom* meaning thunder in Russian). As Eban later recalled, "both Eliahu Epstein, who headed our office in Washington, and [Moshe] Sharett [head of the political department of the Jewish Agency] were fluent in Russian and had conducted many conversations with Gromyko and with his deputy, Semyon Tsarapkin, without receiving any intimation of Soviet support."

The American government had no such intimation, either. All along, the State Department, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the CIA had cautioned that a U.S. vote for partition would enable the Soviets to reap Arab gratitude for opposing it, as Moscow was certainly expected to do. Only four days before Gromyko's speech, the American embassy in Moscow predicted that in the upcoming UN session, the Soviets would oppose "formation in all or part of Palestine of a Jewish state, which the USSR would regard as a Zionist tool of the West, inevitably hostile to the Soviet Union," and would instead favor the "independence of Palestine with its present Arab-majority population."

In opening his speech, Gromyko performed as expected. The British Mandate over Palestine, he explained at length, had failed in its mission; with the spread of violence, the country had deteriorated "into a semi-military or police state." The Mandate had to be terminated. No surprise there: the fiercely anti-British Soviets certainly weren't going to insist that Britain linger in any outpost of its empire.

But then, to the astonishment of all, Gromyko began to dwell upon the Holocaust. During the war, he said, the Jewish people had been subjected to "indescribable sorrow and suffering. It is difficult to express them in dry statistics." Jews had been subjected to "almost complete physical annihilation." And now "hundreds of thousands of Jews are wandering about in various countries of Europe," many in camps for displaced persons where they "are still continuing to undergo great privations. . . . The time has come," he proclaimed, "to help these people, not by word, but by deed. . . . This is a duty of the United Nations."

What, then, should be done? Up to this point, the Soviet position had been that the solution for these hundreds of thousands of homeless Jews lay in Europe. But no longer. "No Western European state," Gromyko asserted,

> has been able to assure the defense of the elemental rights of the Jewish people. This is an unpleasant fact, but unfortunately, like all other facts, it must be admitted, [and it also] explains the aspirations of the Jews to establish their own state.

And then the bombshell:

> It would be unjust not to take this into consideration and to deny the right of the Jewish people to realize this aspiration. It would be unjustifiable to deny this right to the Jewish people, particularly in view of all it has undergone during the war.

The Soviet Union, said Gromyko, would still prefer a "single Arab-Jewish state with equal rights for the Jews and Arabs." But if the UN commission found this "impossible to implement, in view of the deterioration in the relations between Jews and Arabs," there was a "justifiable" alternative: "the partition of Palestine into two independent single states, one Jewish and one Arab."

Eban could hardly believe his ears:

> Nothing had prepared us for this windfall. . . . Moscow was reversing its traditional posture by proposing the option of a Jewish state. I had come to the United Nations with pessimistic assumptions about the balance of forces; I now revised my predictions. . . . For the first time, our political sky was lit up with a gleam of hope. It was no longer necessary to be a romantic optimist in order to foresee a Zionist success. Gromyko had become a Zionist hero.

The news electrified the yishuv. "Palestine Excited over Soviet Stand," a *New York Times* headline proclaimed. Natan Alterman, the yishuv's most prominent Hebrew poet, swiftly published a verse "Telegram to Gromyko." An excerpt:

> There are no words.
> The yishuv is still dazed.
>
> Please understand: for some time,
> we've been deprived of news like this
> with the taste of manna. . . .
>
> It's the vital, warm, good emotion
> of a swimmer struggling against endless waves,
> who's suddenly tossed a lifesaver from the shore.

David Ben-Gurion met Gromyko in New York a short time later. Afterward, while warning against exaggerating the speech's importance, he claimed to have received "additional clarifications" from Gromyko that were "positive" and "did not diminish in the least the impression" made by the public speech, which had both "moral and political value."

III. The Evolution of Soviet Support

As it turned out, Ben-Gurion's caution was misplaced. For the next two years, the Soviet Union proved to be the steadiest great-power supporter of the Jewish state-in-formation and then of Israel. There were at least five major milestones in the evolution of Soviet support.

(1) When UNSCOP returned a recommendation of partition in September 1947, the Soviet Union quickly backed it. On November 26, in the general debate that preceded the historic vote, Gromyko made the Zionist case, brushing off as "unacceptable" the Arab objection that partition constituted "an historical injustice":

> After all, the Jewish people has been closely linked with Palestine for a considerable period in history. Apart from that . . . we must not overlook the position in which the Jewish people found themselves as a result of the recent world war. . . . The solution of the Palestine problem into two separate states will be of profound historical significance, because this decision will meet the legitimate demands of the Jewish people, hundreds of thousands of whom, as you know, are still without a country, without homes, having found temporary shelter only in special camps in some Western European countries.

The Soviet Union voted "yes" for partition, as did its satellites Belorussia, Ukraine, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. (Yugoslavia, another satellite, abstained.)

(2) In March 1948, with the United States retreating from the idea of partition, the Soviet Union stood firmly in favor of it and attacked the alternative American proposal of a UN trusteeship. On April 20, as the clock wound down on the British Mandate, Gromyko denounced trusteeship as an idea that would place Palestine "in a state of virtual colonial slavery." Only partition into independent states would "satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the Jewish people, which had suffered so much under the Hitler regime." If trusteeship were put to a vote, he warned, the Soviet Union would cast a "no" ballot.

(3) Also at the start of 1948, the Soviet Union, while sending no equipment on its own, gave a nod to crucial arms deals between Czechoslovakia and Israel, assuring the latter an advantage in the battle with the Palestinian Arabs that was already under way. The Czech motive was mundane: a need for foreign currency. But the deal depended on Soviet acquiescence (and,

according to some accounts, on Stalin's personal authorization).

The arms deliveries made it possible to provide every Israeli recruit with his or her own weapon and ample ammunition. And the guns arrived in the nick of time, allowing the Haganah to go on the offensive in the lead-up to independence ("Plan Dalet").

At the start of 1948, the Soviet Union gave a nod to crucial arms deals between Czechoslovakia and Israel, assuring the latter an advantage in its war of independence. "They saved the country, I have no doubt of that," Ben-Gurion said.

"They saved the country, I have no doubt of that," Ben-Gurion would say two decades later. "The Czech arms deal was the greatest help, it saved us and without it I very much doubt if we could have survived the first month." Golda Meir, in her memoirs, similarly wrote that without the arms from the Eastern bloc, "I do not know whether we actually could have held out until the tide changed, as it did by June 1948."

(4) In June 1948, as Israel gained the upper hand, the Soviets backed the most important Israeli objections to the plan for a settlement being pushed by the UN mediator Count Folke Bernadotte. Responding to Bernadotte's proposal to transfer the entire Negev to Transjordan, foreign minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov advised Stalin that this would put four-fifths of Israeli territory into the hands of Transjordan—"i.e., into British control"—and should be rejected. ("Comrade Stalin agrees," Molotov scribbled on the document.)

(5) The Soviets also supported Israel on the question of Palestinian Arab refugees. Instead of Bernardotte's proposal that these Arabs be given the right to return to the territory of the Jewish state, the Soviets preferred that "the Jews be given the opportunity to come to an agreement with the Arabs on this matter in the course of peace negotiations." Near the end of the war, in December 1948, the Soviet Union and its satellites voted against General Assembly resolution 194, later cited as guaranteeing a "right of return" for Palestinian Arab refugees. (The United States voted in favor.)

In sum, Israel could hardly have asked for more. In October 1948, Sharett reported to the Israeli cabinet that "the Eastern bloc supports us staunchly. . . . In the Security Council the Russians are operating not just as our allies, but as our emissaries." Eban noted that for these "two or three years," the Soviets "were more constant in their assertiveness in support of Israel than even the United States. There were no wobblings, no vacillations." Through it all, moreover, the Soviets had "attacked the Arabs vehemently." To Eban's mind, this had to do with the Soviet political style, so totally at odds with the American:

> Then and afterward, the Soviet Union were either for you or against you. If they were for you, they were 100-percent; if they were against you, they were 100-percent. The United

> States always had a plurality in their objectives and tried to combine their objectives in a single policy. So they were never 100-percent for you, and they were never 100-percent against you. Nobody could completely trust them and nobody could completely despair of them.

IV. Why Stalin Did It

Why did Stalin do it? The question has perplexed historians for 70 years. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, scholars have studied and published hundreds of Soviet documents on early Soviet-Israel relations. These documents include policy recommendations made to Stalin and instructions from the Soviet foreign ministry to its diplomats, but no document has revealed Stalin's own thinking.

Because the sudden shift defied belief, some questioned whether Stalin gave much thought to it at all. This was the view of the historian Walter Laqueur. A decade after the events, Laqueur expressed

> some doubt whether the decision to support the establishment of a Jewish state was taken at top level; in view of subsequent developments it is at least possible that this course of action was recommended by some foreign-ministry advisers and approved by Stalin in a fit of absentmindedness.

Possible, yes—but, to judge from the Soviet documents, unlikely. In July 1947, the first secretary of the Soviet embassy in Washington insisted that "it was only after a careful and comprehensive analysis of the situation that Gromyko had been authorized to make his statement." Throughout that period of high-level analysis, nearly all of Stalin's foreign-policy advisers opposed partition (as did Truman's). Their consensus was that support for a Jewish state would provoke "an unfavorable reaction" across the Arab world.

Only Stalin could have overturned this consensus. So great a pivot in official policy, argues the cold-war historian Vladislav Zubok, "was unthinkable without Stalin's personal decision. . . . [It was] a gamble, a probe, that only Stalin could come up with." Indeed, it would have been perilous for any underling to propose support for the Zionist project of a Jewish state. Molotov, foreign minister and Politburo member at the time, later recalled that when it came to the idea of a Jewish state, "everyone objected but us—me and Stalin."

So again: why did Stalin decide as he did? No historians give any weight to pro-Jewish sentiment. At Yalta in February 1945, Stalin had described the Jews to President Franklin D. Roosevelt as "middlemen, profiteers, and parasites." There is no evidence that his view ever changed, except for the worse. Benny Morris has gone the farthest in speculating that the

Soviets, in addition to considerations of realpolitik, might also have been "moved by the horrors of the Holocaust and by a sense of camaraderie with fellow sufferers at Nazi hands." Bernard Lewis is not persuaded: "It is difficult to believe that Stalin, who killed countless millions in his own concentration camps, was moved by compassion for the plight of Hitler's surviving victims."

An American view, commonplace at the time, was that Stalin simply wanted to create turmoil. Partition would end in war, which, whatever its consequences, the Soviets could somehow exploit. Thus, the American number-two at the United Nations wondered "whether the Russians want partition or whether it is chaos they seek in Palestine." George Kennan, the foremost Soviet expert at the State Department, called partition "favorable to Soviet objectives of sowing dissension and discord in non-Communist countries."

How exactly such discord would serve Soviet interests remained unclear, however. Right up to Gromyko's May 1947 speech (and in some cases, even later), every relevant agency of the U.S. government assumed that the Soviets would *oppose* partition in order to win Arab favor, while America would pay a heavy price in Arab opinion for *supporting* it. Not surprisingly, then, the Americans remained befuddled by the Soviet move, which seemed to them utterly counterintuitive.

Dean Rusk, head of the UN desk at the State Department, admitted to being "puzzled" by the "novelty of what seemed to be a pro-Zionist [Soviet] policy." Robert Lovett, under-secretary of state, professed himself "mystified." Kennan's imagination also came up short: "There is no way of telling in exactly what manner the USSR will attempt to turn partition to its advantage." ("It must be assumed, however," he lamely added, "that Moscow will actively endeavor to find some means of exploiting the opportunity.")

> **Astute observers of Soviet policy have attributed a plausible motive to Stalin: the Jewish state would be a useful lever for dislodging Britain from the heart of the region.**

Most astute observers of Soviet policy, then and now, have attributed a more precise and plausible motive to Stalin. By 1947, the cold war had already seeped into the Mediterranean and the Middle East via Greece, Turkey, and Iran. Stalin may have concluded that the cause of a Jewish state would be a useful lever for dislodging Britain from the heart of the region. The British might still hold sway over their Arab clients in Transjordan and Iraq, and keep Egypt in their grip. But a Jewish state would drive the British out of Palestine, lock, stock, and barrel. True, supporting it would come at a cost: the (small) Arab Communist parties would be devastated. But it was a negligible price to pay in return for securing Britain's ignominious retreat from one of its biggest bases in the Middle East.

This was clear as early as June 1946 to a leading Zionist diplomat, Eliahu Sasson, whose field

was Arab politics. From this vantage point, he observed the Soviets acting everywhere in the Middle East to counter the British. His prescient conclusion:

> Not only is there no reason to expect Russian policy to be hostile to us, there are grounds for thinking it will be friendly. Not out of sympathy to us or out of hatred toward the Arabs, but in order to settle political accounts with England.

The anti-British logic also figured in some Soviet policy papers, and in retrospect it makes perfect sense. But as there is still nothing straight from Stalin's mouth, the riddle lingers. Molotov didn't solve it in 1972, when he gave a confused account of his rationale:

> It's one thing to be anti-Zionist and anti-bourgeois and quite another to be against the Jewish people. . . . The Jews had long struggled for their own state under a Zionist flag. We, of course, were against Zionism. But to refuse a people the right to statehood would mean oppressing them.

Thus the paradox: the state of Israel came into being with the crucial support of a regime that continued to see itself as "against Zionism," "of course."

V. The Zionist Grooming of Russia

An additional and crucial element—the one I signaled early on—will help fill out the picture. Soviet support for partition and for Israel has usually been described as a "windfall" (Eban's word) that took the Zionists by surprise. But, years before Gromyko's speech, Zionist leaders themselves had begun to pursue Soviet support. Although they were surprised in 1947, many would come to believe that their own earlier efforts had produced the turnabout.

The central figures in this saga include Weizmann and Ben-Gurion. But at the very center there may stand a man largely forgotten to Israel's history: Ivan Mikhailovich Maisky.

From 1932 to 1943, Maisky served as Stalin's ambassador to the Court of St. James. Of Polish-Jewish ancestry, he had been a revolutionary as a young man and spent World War I in British exile. Returning to Russia after the 1917 revolution, he joined the Bolshevik party and put his charm to work as a diplomat.

Posted back to London, Maisky befriended a who's-who of the British political and intellectual elite, from Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill to George Bernard Shaw and Beatrice Webb. Today, historians of the Soviet Union celebrate Maisky for his copious diary, in which he tells how, through treacherous waters, he adroitly steered Soviet-British relations through most of the war.

Chaim Weizmann, who conducted Zionist diplomacy from London, had taken notice. During the earlier world war, Weizmann had anticipated the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, placed his bet on Britain, and been instrumental in securing the Balfour Declaration. By 1941, as Zionism's elder statesman and president of the World Zionist Organization, he was anguished by Britain's betrayal of its pledge to facilitate a Jewish national home in Palestine. Now the new world war seemed likely to undo the British Empire, throwing open the Middle East once again. Who would fill the vacuum? Whom should the Zionists cultivate?

Weizmann had no illusions about Stalin. In addition to the familiar catalogue of the Soviet dictator's treachery, Weizmann had personal experience of his cruelty. Although most of the Weizmann siblings had left Russia before 1917, his younger brother Shmuel had gone back to build the "revolution" and disappeared in the "Great Purge" of the late 1930s.

Weizmann had no illusions about Stalin, whose forces had killed his brother. Yet, despite this, Weizmann thought that under certain circumstances, Stalin might prove willing to aid the Zionist cause.

Yet, despite this, Weizmann thought that under certain circumstances, Stalin might prove willing to aid the Zionist cause—and Ivan Maisky was Stalin's most proximate agent. "A few days ago I had an unexpected visitor," wrote Maisky in his diary in February 1941: "the well-known Zionist leader Dr. Weizmann." Maisky was impressed by the dignified demeanor of this "tall, elderly, elegantly dressed gentleman" who spoke calmly and deliberately in "excellent Russian."

In their conversation, the man credited with winning the Balfour Declaration anticipated the final demise of the British-Zionist entente. The English, he offered, "don't like the Jews," and "prefer the Arabs to the Jews." They were "hardly likely to agree" to mass immigration into Palestine of Jews who might survive the war. "And if they don't agree, what will happen?" Weizmann sharpened the question: "What has a British victory to offer the Jews?" The implied message: once the war ended, the Zionists would finalize their divorce from Britain and be open to new relationships.

So began the wooing of Maisky, a joint effort by Weizmann and Ben-Gurion. It consisted of overtures and memos in which the Zionist leaders hammered away at set themes: the Jews were resolved to fight for their freedom, a Jewish state would be neutral, and the Arabs were either British agents or collaborators of Nazi Germany.

In particular, the two leaders worked to persuade Maisky that Palestine was a one-stop solution for Europe's desperate Jewish masses. All through the Mandate period, critics of Zionism claimed that the country couldn't absorb enough Jews to solve Europe's Jewish "problem." The Zionists worked especially hard to persuade Maisky otherwise.

Thus, when, at their first meeting, Maisky "expressed some surprise about how Weizmann hoped to settle five million Jews on territory occupied by one million Arabs," Weizmann replied that the Arab was "the father of the desert. . . . Give me the land occupied by a million Arabs, and I will easily settle five times that number of Jews on it." In their second meeting, in September 1943, Maisky repeated his worry about the "smallness" of Palestine, to which Weizmann responded by invoking a report by the renowned American irrigation engineer Walter Clay Lowdermilk, who estimated that the country could absorb another four million European Jewish refugees. The following month, Maisky raised the same issue with Ben-Gurion: "We want to know the truth, what is the capacity of Palestine?" Ben-Gurion spoke more modestly of two million Jews, and in due course provided Maisky with a supporting memorandum.

The two Zionist leaders also assured Maisky that the yishuv's social and economic organization was not only compatible with Communism but even resembled it. The kibbutzim, Ben-Gurion emphasized in October 1941, while not ideologically Communist, "from an economic point of view . . . were communistic." Palestine was home to "the only organized labor movement in the whole of the Middle East" and "the nucleus of a socialist commonwealth."

In March 1943, Weizmann sent a memo to Maisky, which included this deftly ingratiating passage:

> Three of the most fundamental aspects of Soviet social philosophy are embodied in the national system being built in Palestine by the Zionist movement: collective welfare and not individual gain is the guiding principle and goal of the economic structure; equality of standing is established in the community between manual and intellectual workers; and consequently the fullest scope is provided for intellectual life and the development of labor. There are no fundamental psychological barriers to mutual understanding, and the Zionist movement has never felt antagonistic to Soviet social philosophy.

As the war progressed and the Soviets began to push the Germans back in Europe, Zionist leaders gained the sense that their efforts were beginning to pay off. In September 1943, as Maisky prepared to leave London for Moscow to help plan the postwar settlement, Weizmann met him one last time. The Zionists, Weizmann said, "had been friendly toward Russia and hoped that the Soviet government would understand their aims." Maisky replied that "he could not commit his government, but he believed that the Soviets would support them. . . . He thought that Russia would certainly stand by them"—an early hint (or hunch), offered three-and-a-half years before Gromyko's dramatic bombshell at the United Nations.

Maisky's route back to Moscow took him through the Middle East, and in October he visited Palestine. Now he was the one to seize the initiative, reaching out to Ben-Gurion, who took him and his wife on an afternoon visit to two kibbutzim near Jerusalem. As if on an official

fact-finding trip, Maisky expressed keen interest in all aspects of kibbutz communal life and even posed for a photograph with Ben-Gurion and Golda Meir.

On the return ride to Jerusalem, Maisky told Ben-Gurion that "after the war there will be a serious Jewish problem and it will have to be resolved; we have to express an opinion, so we must know." Ben-Gurion could hardly believe this turn of events. "It was all a great surprise to me," he reported to his colleagues. "For me it was a revelation. I could hardly believe it. It obligates us to act—here is another country that is taking an interest in this question."

Maisky wrote a memo on his visit to Palestine. No historian has been allowed to see it, so it remains the subject of endless speculation—but while the details aren't known, its thrust is well-attested. The Ukrainian foreign minister at the time called the report "full of admiration at the wonderful progressive achievements of the Jews in Palestine." Harold Laski, the British socialist leader, told Ben-Gurion in 1944 that "I read Maisky's secret report and I became a Zionist."

Did the memo have a similar effect in Moscow? The historian Gabriel Gorodetsky, the translator and editor of Maisky's diaries, has dismissed the notion that Zionist cultivation of Maisky made a decisive difference. Maisky "misled" Ben-Gurion by suggesting that he exerted a vast influence over Soviet foreign policy; although he did prepare a "glowing report" for Stalin, he had already been shunted aside. On his return to Moscow in 1943, Gorodetsky writes, "he found the doors to the Kremlin bolted." While he continued to advise Stalin at the Yalta and Potsdam conferences, he was out of the ministry by the end of 1945. Zionist leaders only imagined that their wooing of Maisky had anything to do with Stalin's decision.

In one obvious sense, this is true: Stalin made his decision more than three years after Maisky's report, and in the context of the cold war. But the Zionist outreach to Maisky was itself only the most high-profile facet of a more extensive campaign that mobilized another layer of Zionist diplomats (including Sharett, Epstein, and Nahum Goldmann), involved overtures to Soviet missions from Washington to Ankara, and continued right up to Gromyko's speech.

> **Would the transformation in the Soviet view have occurred without years of activist Zionist diplomacy? Zionist leaders had no doubt: somehow, they had tipped the scales.**

The Zionist statesmen involved in this pursuit were neither naïve nor uninformed about the workings of the Soviet state. In particular, Ben-Gurion's knowledge of the Soviet Union was deep and wide. As a young socialist organizer, he had spent three months there in 1923 and would later testify that "we [Zionists] were constant in our love for the great revolution in Russia." But in 1928 the Soviet regime banned even the most socialist forms of Zionism, and Ben-Gurion found that things then became visible "in their true light." He understood

perfectly that reconciliation with Moscow "will come neither as a result of kibbutz settlement . . . nor by translating Lenin or Stalin into Hebrew."

Still, he and his colleagues also knew just what to say (and in Russian) so as to make support for a Jewish state appear consistent, if not with Soviet ideology or propaganda, then with Soviet interests. And, at the moment of decision, consistent the two seemed to be. In July 1947, the second secretary of the Soviet embassy in Washington told Epstein that the Soviets knew perfectly well "that [Zionist] social experiments in collectivism have nothing to do with the Marxist interpretation of collectivism." But, he added, the yishuv seemed to be "a peaceful, democratic and progressive community . . . which can block anti-Soviet intrigues, so easily hatched among the reactionary circles ruling the Arab countries at present."

Would this transformation in the Soviet view have occurred without years of activist Zionist diplomacy? And would it have occurred in time? Historians might differ. But Zionist leaders had no doubt: somehow, they had tipped the scales.

VI. Why the Soviets Turned on Israel

Summarizing the support given the Zionists by the Soviet Union, Walter Laqueur wrote that "without it they would not have stood a chance." Yet that support never became the foundation of a lasting alliance. Indeed, already by 1949, the Soviet Union and Israel were headed for a collision. What went wrong?

If it is true that the Soviet aim was to push Britain out, then by 1949 this aim had been achieved. Israel had won a decisive military victory and had even conquered the Negev, which Britain had hoped to keep as a bridge between Egypt and Transjordan. Britain's final exit from the Middle East would take another decade, but its retreat began with the creation of Israel. As far as Soviet strategy was concerned, it was "mission accomplished."

But the Soviets didn't just withdraw support; they were becoming openly hostile. Driving the pendulum back were a number of factors, including Stalin's increasingly severe paranoia on all fronts. And then there was a domestic problem where Soviet Jews were concerned.

During the war, Zionist leaders had assured Soviet authorities that the country's Jews were out of bounds for Zionist proselytization. "I'm not worried about [Soviet Jews]," Weizmann had told Maisky at their first meeting.

> They are not under any threat. In 20 or 30 years' time, if the present regime in your county lasts, they will be assimilated. . . . Soviet Jews will gradually merge with the general current of Russian life, as an inalienable part of it. I may not like it, but I'm

> ready to accept it: at least Soviet Jews are on firm ground, and their fate does not make me shudder.

But when Gromyko in 1947 announced the turn in Soviet policy, a wave of euphoria swept Soviet Jewry. From synagogues to labor camps, Jews openly expressed their Zionist yearnings. This fever only intensified upon the partition resolution, the declaration of the state, and finally the arrival of Golda Meir as Israel's first envoy in September 1948. On her first sabbath in Moscow, tens of thousands of Jews filled the streets around the city's main synagogue, and they did so again on the Jewish New Year and Yom Kippur. Meir gave a vivid description of the scene in her memoirs:

> A crowd of close to 50,000 people was waiting for us. For a minute, I could not grasp what had happened—or even who they were. And then it dawned on me. They had come—those good, brave Jews—in order to be with us, to demonstrate their sense of kinship and to celebrate the establishment of the State of Israel. . . . Someone pushed me into a cab. But the cab couldn't move either, because the crowd was cheering; laughing, weeping Jews had engulfed it. . . . I stuck my head out of the window of the cab and said: *"A dank eich vos ihr seit geblieben Yidden"* (Thank you for having remained Jews.)

It was all very moving. But Mordechai Namir, the first secretary of the Israeli diplomatic mission, recalled that the spontaneous demonstration produced "a sinking feeling in our hearts because of the suspicion that the blatant conduct of the congregation had crossed the acceptable limits . . . and that we had participated in a very tragic event."

In the wake of USSR support for Israel, a wave of euphoria swept Soviet Jewry. In response, by the end of 1948, Stalin launched a "secret pogrom" against leading Jews accused of Zionist conspiracy.

The sequel bore out these apprehensions. Gromyko had specified in his speech that "no *Western* European state" had assured elemental Jewish rights (emphasis added). The implication was that the rights of Soviet Jews hadn't been compromised; for them now to be asserting the contrary by hailing Israel as their redemption caught the authorities off-guard. With each passing month they grew more alarmed at the percolation of Zionist sympathies at home.

Stalin thus had ample reason to be alarmed by the impact his own policy was having on the two-and-a-half million Soviet Jews who after the Holocaust formed the largest mass of Jews in Europe. Decades of repression had been suddenly lifted, releasing a surge of ethnic and nationalist fervor that would in turn necessitate even more brutal measures of repression. Already by the end of 1948, he had launched what one historian has called a "secret pogrom"

against leading Jews accused of Zionist conspiracy.

The subsequent persecutions of the early 1950s, from the show trial and execution in Prague of Rudolf Slansky and other high-placed Jewish members of the Czech Communist party to the Moscow "Doctors' Plot," warrant their own grim telling. Suffice it to say that in the Soviet Union and its satellites, domestic anti-Semitism and opposition to Israel became inseparable twins.

VII. Zionists Prefer the West

Nor was it simply that Stalin deplored Zionism and hated the Jews. For its part, the mainstream Zionist leadership had no great regard for Stalin or the Soviet Union. Their preference lay with the West.

True, this did not apply to the far-left Zionist factions that in 1948 coalesced in Israel's Mapam party. Until the Prague trials in 1952, most of its members, many of whom had also played leading roles in the yishuv's military defense, looked favorably upon the Soviet Union. Portraits of Stalin brooded over the dining halls of some of their kibbutzim, and the KGB successfully recruited leading Mapam members as agents. But the pro-Soviet left, even at its height, did not appeal to more than 15 percent of the public—its share in Israel's first elections in 1949—and it declined steadily thereafter.

True, too, at the height of Soviet support, a wave of gratitude had swept the yishuv as a whole. One especially astute witness was the Jewish-Hungarian author Arthur Koestler, who spent much of 1948 in Israel. Koestler, a former Communist and Comintern agent during the Spanish Civil War, owed his fame to his 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*. Set in 1938 in the midst of the "Great Purge," the book accused Stalin of criminal betrayal.

In a piece of reportage from Israel in June 1948, Koestler noted (with understatement) that "this correspondent is hardly susceptible to Stalinite leanings":

> And yet, had he suffered what people here have suffered in the past six months, while one leading Western democracy [Britain] waged an almost undisguised war on them and a second [the United States] looked on, the psychological pressure of circumstances might have turned even him into a fellow traveler [of Communist Russia]. . . . The almost weekly oscillations of American policy, and the paradox that America recognized Israel but by maintaining the arms embargo deprived it of its means of defense, increased the general feeling of bitterness and disgust with the West.

Koestler had witnessed the "spontaneous surge of sympathy and gratitude" toward the Soviet Union among Israelis. Nevertheless, to his mind, this "emotional leaning" was a transient thing. The majority of Jews in Palestine, including in Ben-Gurion's Labor party,

> realize[d] that Russia's gesture was exclusively designed to serve her own political aims. They remembered well that for 30 years Russia had persecuted Zionism as a fascist movement. The sudden and total reversal of Soviet policy . . . was too obvious a maneuver to take them in.

For Koestler, there was no question that mainstream Zionists preferred the West; the shallow sympathy for the Soviets arose only from the West's own reluctant reception of Israel.

That same sympathy, however, had fed a malicious narrative among American opponents of Zionism in the State Department, the CIA, and the Pentagon who asserted that a Jewish state would become a Soviet satellite, infiltrated by Soviet agents in the guise of Jewish refugees. Zionist leaders denied this claim at every turn. The first to do so was Weizmann, in a letter to Truman on the very eve of the partition vote. Weizmann cautioned the president against believing predictions "that our project in Palestine may in some way be used as channel for the infiltration of Communist ideas in the Middle East":

> Nothing is further from the truth. Our immigrants from Eastern Europe are precisely those who are leaving the Communist scene with which they do not wish to be integrated. Otherwise, they would not leave at all. Had there been a serious attempt by the Soviets to introduce Communist influences through our immigration, they could easily have done so in previous decades. Every election and all observation in Palestine testifies to the trivial hold which Communism has achieved in our community.

Not only that, but the yishuv felt a growing attraction to the United States, now home to the largest Jewish community in the world. Weizmann, once installed as the new president of Israel, assured James McDonald, the first U.S. ambassador, that "our people are democratic and realize that only through the cooperation and support of the United States can they become strong and remain free." Ben-Gurion chimed in, telling McDonald that "Rome would become Communist before Jerusalem [would]."

McDonald agreed. "When the chips were down and Israel was forced to make her choice," he later wrote, "that choice was almost always pro-Western." The Soviet ambassador, Pavel Yershov, concurred, lamenting that Israel was "slid[ing] further and further toward the American position" and "might capitulate completely to the Americans, becoming a tool for the realization of their expansionist plans."

American wariness that Israel would tip in Moscow's direction may have figured in the very decision now celebrated as the birth of U.S.-

Formally, however, Israel had declared its "neutrality" between East and West: this was crucial to its efforts to extricate hundreds of thousands of Jews remaining in Soviet satellite countries. Nor did Israel's early leaders, however much they craved the favor of United States, shy away from leveraging their Soviet ties by hinting that they might yet tip in Moscow's direction. Weizmann himself warned that if the West "humiliated and deserted Israel in the UN and elsewhere," its people would become "alienated" and (by implication) drift toward the Soviets. Koestler thought this quite impossible, but he worried that Ben-Gurion and Sharett were "too coy" to say so, giving rise to suspicion in Washington that Israel might "might topple over to the other side."

In retrospect, such a scenario seems incredible. But wariness of it, and the desirability of pre-empting it, may actually have figured in the very decision now celebrated as the birth of U.S.-Israel relations. In the crucial meeting at which Truman decided in favor of immediate recognition of Israel, White House counsel Clark Clifford made the compelling argument that, by recognizing Israel first, the U.S. could "steal a march on the USSR." One observer of the decision noted the prevalence of the "fairly well-founded suspicion that the U.S. speedy recognition was prompted primarily by fears that the Soviet Union might do it first." Among the mix of Truman's motives, one-upping the Soviets could not have been too far from the surface.

As Israel grew stronger, the cold-war argument became more compelling. By July 1948, Philip Jessup, the number-two in the U.S. mission to the UN, could already describe Israel as "more than a match" for any combination of Arab forces. Jessup also reported that Israel was "aware of the disadvantages to it of too close an association with the Soviet Union" and "recognize[d] that greater advantages would be gained from a closer association with the U.S. and other Western powers." Warning that were Israel "thrown into the arms of the Soviet Union it could become a force operating to a very great disadvantage to the U.S., the UK, and other Western powers," Jessup drew the clear conclusion: treating Israel "fairly" would transform it into "a force operating to our own advantage."

The journey from "fair treatment" of Israel to the post-1967 strategic alliance with the United States would prove to be a long one, with many ups and downs. But it originated in the desire to keep Israel out of the Soviet orbit—an American reaction to a highly improbable scenario that was itself made plausible only by Stalin's surprising but consistent support for the Jewish state at the moment of its birth. That being the case, perhaps there is another reason for Israel to thank Stalin: he inadvertently helped Israel build its first bridges to United States.

VIII. Lessons for Today

In 1961, the Soviet foreign ministry published a volume of basic documents on Soviet-Arab relations. Although Gromyko himself chaired the publication committee, *none* of his UN speeches in support of Israel appeared in the book. Nor did his 1988 Russian-language memoirs mention the fact of Soviet support for Israel in 1947 and 1948, or his role in proclaiming it. The Soviets wanted nothing more than to forget the entire episode, and so encourage their Arab clients to do the same. "Israel has turned out badly," reflected Molotov in his last years, when asked about Soviet support for its establishment. "But Lord Almighty! That's American imperialism for you."

Thankfully, a few diligent historians have done much over the past two decades to unearth the record and tell the story in detail. In mustering evidence for this essay, I've relied largely on their efforts. They include, most notably, Yaakov Ro'i, Arnold Krammer, and Uri Bialer, whose detailed book-length accounts appeared before the fall of the Soviet Union; and Gabriel Gorodetsky, Benjamin Pinkus, and Laurent Rucker, who in the aftermath of the regime's collapse plumbed accessible archives to add many new dimensions. What with important scholarly articles by others also filling gaps, the story is there for all who seek it.

And yet, too few do. Both Israeli diplomats and American Zionists prefer to tell the same simple tale reflected in Ambassador Danon's statement: "From the moment President Truman became the first world leader to recognize the new Jewish state, Israel has had no better friend that the United States of America." Everyone likes the story of a 70-year love affair between scrappy little Israel and the world's greatest superpower and democracy. But as we have seen, this statement, however accurate it would become in later years, was untrue in the earliest ones when, as Abba Eban attested from his experience as Israel's first ambassador to the UN, the Soviets were "more constant in their assertiveness in support of Israel than even the United States."

Unfortunately, this historical misrepresentation exacts a cost. First, it tends to obscure the real significance of the international legitimacy conferred on Israel by the partition vote. Yes, it took heroic efforts by partition's supporters, including the United States, to round up the required two-thirds "yes" votes in the General Assembly. But the successful outcome was due to the fundamental fact that both of the victorious great powers, the United States *and* the Soviet Union, supported partition and the creation of a Jewish state. This convergence created the updraft that drew in the others.

Abba Eban regarded partition as "the first American-Soviet agreement in the postwar era." That it was an agreement over the creation of the Jewish state suggests just how deep lie the foundations of Israel's international legitimacy. Many Arab apologists still seek to demonstrate that this or that ballot in the General Assembly was obtained through threat or barter, and it is true that in November 1947, advocates of partition pulled out all the stops. But with both superpowers aligned, it required a special animus against Zionism to prompt a "no"

ballot. With few exceptions, this existed only in countries with Muslim majorities.

Second, the false idea that the United States was Israel's "best friend" in 1948 subtracts from the debt owed to the first Israelis themselves. It would have been much easier to defeat the Palestinian Arabs, and even the combined Arab forces, with the backing of the world's greatest power. But Israel didn't enjoy that backing. Sharett, in a meeting with secretary of state George Marshall, spoke bluntly to this point (as summarized by Israel's first cabinet secretary, Zeev Sharaf):

> The United States, [Sharett] continued, had not helped to establish the state; [it] had assisted only by taking part in the vote at the United Nations, and this would not be forgotten. But we, the Jewish people, he said, were carrying on the fight in Palestine ourselves without any aid whatever. We had asked for arms, but they had not been given; we had asked for military guidance, but it had been withheld; finally, we had asked for armor plating for buses, but even this had been refused. Whatever we had secured was with our own capacities alone.

Sharett was too diplomatic to remind Marshall of just what, by contrast, the Soviets had done for Israel.

In May 1949, Truman sent a threatening letter to Ben-Gurion criticizing Israel's postwar position on borders and refugees. Truman mentioned that the American government (and people) had "given generous support to the creation of Israel." In his diary, a fuming Ben-Gurion derided this claim, discounting even U.S. support of partition:

> The state of Israel was not established as a consequence of the UN resolution. Neither America nor any other country saw the resolution through, nor did they stop the Arab countries (and the British mandatory government) from declaring total war on us in violation of UN resolutions. America did not raise a finger to save us and, moreover, imposed an arms embargo, and had we been destroyed they would not have resurrected us.

The founders of Israel would thus have scoffed at the idea that the United States government stood squarely by the new state at its creation. Israel's existence, they believed, was owed entirely to their own courage and grit—and to crates of guns sent by order of Stalin, purchased with millions of dollars sent by American Jews.

> **Telling the partition story as "America-to-the-rescue" robs it of its most important lessons. Zionism's early leaders never said never, and never took "no" for an answer.**

Third, telling the partition story as "America-to-the-rescue" robs it of its most important

lessons. The genius of Zionist diplomacy, in 1947 as in 1917, resided in accurately detecting the rise and decline of powers, and in exploiting their competitive rivalries. The Zionists had too much experience to rely on the friendship of any one power. Indeed, it might be said that Zionism insisted that the Jews had no steadfast "best friends" at all. World wars, revolutions, collapsing empires—Zionism's leaders saw no constants in international affairs, and they relentlessly probed world capitals for the first signs of shifts in policy and power. In practicing a diversified diplomacy, the Zionists never said never, and never took "no" for an answer.

No Zionist today would think to celebrate the partition vote by praising the wise foresight of Comrade Stalin. But it would be a missed opportunity (and bad history) to celebrate it only by hailing Truman, the would-be Cyrus. On that day, the world welcomed the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. It happened because shrewd and persistent Zionist statesmen and diplomats persuaded the leaders of both increasingly antagonistic great powers that a Jewish state would serve the interests of each.

"In terms both of Soviet and of American policy," wrote Paul Johnson in the 1998 essay I quoted at the outset, "Israel slipped into existence through a window that briefly opened, and just as suddenly closed." It was Zionist statesmanship—critically coordinated with Zionist arms—that opened the window just wide enough, and kept it open long enough, for Israel to enter. Surely this achievement is the one that deserves to be remembered and celebrated in Flushing Meadows 70 years to the day. The saga of the partition vote, far from being a singularly American story, is a reminder that Israel must remain ever-nimble in maneuvering among the powers, and not rely exclusively on a single one. This was crucial at Israel's birth, and might prove crucial again.

Finally, there is yet another cause for reflection as Israel approaches its 70th anniversary. In the early years of the 20th century, the Zionist and the Russian revolutions occurred in tandem. They arose from related discontents, in much of the same geographic space. Not surprisingly, they both competed for the allegiance and energies of Jews. The Soviet Union lasted almost 69 years to the day, from 1922 to 1991. As of this year, the state of Israel has lasted longer, and it continues to flourish. Israel won the war for the Jews, as surely as the United States won the cold war.

The Soviet legacy is damnable with regard to Israel, too. The Soviet Union later armed and incited the Arabs to wage wars on Israel that drew blood and inflicted suffering. But let Israel record two credits to the ledger of that calamitous 20th-century regime. First, as Israel's founders attested and as this essay has shown, the Soviet Union gave vital support to Israel at its birth. Second, it saved millions of Jews from otherwise certain destruction by the Nazis—Jews who, with their descendants, would crucially augment the population of Israel upon the eventual Soviet collapse.

This does not mitigate the crimes perpetrated by Stalin, whose barbarity sometimes rivaled Hitler's. It is a reminder that while Israel should always prefer the good company of the

righteous, the others must not be neglected.

ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

WHY THE 1947 UN PARTITION RESOLUTION MUST BE CELEBRATED

https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/israel-zionism/2017/11/why-the-1947-un-partition-resolution-must-be-celebrated/

As compared with the festivities surrounding the Balfour Declaration centenary, little attention has been paid to the 70th anniversary of the UN vote. This is a missed opportunity.

November 27, 2017 | Martin Kramer

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This is a response to *Who Saved Israel in 1947?*, originally published in *Mosaic* in November 2017

Earlier this month, the governments of Britain and Israel marked the centenary of the Balfour Declaration with much fanfare. From London to Jerusalem, prime ministers, parliamentarians, and protesters weighed in. The world's major media outlets ran extended analyses, while historians (myself included) enjoyed their fleeting few minutes of fame.

In comparison, notice of this week's 70th anniversary of the 1947 UN partition resolution, the first international legitimation of a Jewish state—and the subject of my essay, "Who Saved Israel in

Israelis prepare a 2011 ceremony reconstructing the celebrations that took place on November 29, 1947 following passage of the UN partition plan for Palestine, which led to the creation of the state of Israel. MENAHEM KAHANA/AFP/Getty Images.

1947?"—will be subdued. Why?

A centenary is certainly a rarer thing, and the Balfour Declaration makes for dramatic telling. But the vote over the partition resolution had plenty of drama, too, and some of us, or our parents or grandparents, still remember the suspense that attended it and the elation that followed.

The Israeli novelist Amos Oz is one of them. In an autobiographical passage, he recalled that night in Jerusalem as his father stroked his head in his darkened bedroom:

> "From the moment we have our own state [said Oz's father], you will never be bullied just because you are a Jew and because Jews are so-and-sos. Not that. Never again. From tonight that's finished here. Forever." I reached out sleepily to touch his face, just below his high forehead, and all of a sudden instead of his glasses my fingers met tears. Never in my life, before or after that night, not even when my mother died, did I see my father cry. And in fact I didn't see him cry that night, either. Only my left hand saw.

For those of us who are too young to remember the tears or the dancing in the streets, something of the excitement of the vote is easily retrievable. The balloting at the United Nations occurred in the presence of cameras, and anyone can see it spring to life on YouTube, along with the joyous celebrations that ensued. By contrast, the ecstasy prompted by the Balfour Declaration seems remote. Some 100,000 reportedly turned out in the streets of Odessa, but not even one photograph attests to it.

So why, one asks again, did the Balfour Declaration centenary resonate, while the partition-vote anniversary doesn't?

First, the subsequent 70 years have been marked by repeated assaults on Israel's legitimacy, launched from within that very same United Nations. This reached an obscene climax in 1975, when the General Assembly passed a resolution defining Zionism "as a form of racism and racial discrimination." And while the General Assembly revoked that resolution in 1991, UN bodies continue to defame Israel through hateful resolutions.

As Benny Morris speculates in his insightful response to my essay, "were the same vote held today, the 193 General Assembly members would likely vote, overwhelmingly, against Jewish statehood."

Even at the time, however, Israel's founders also knew that a General Assembly vote wasn't a firm anchor. Israel's declaration of independence in May 1948 did invoke the partition resolution, but added a telling assertion: "This recognition by the United Nations of the right of the Jewish people to establish their state is irrevocable." Why irrevocable? Because the

founders knew perfectly well that a future vote at the United Nations might revoke it. The resolution reflected the political interests of UN member states at a moment in time. Those interests were bound to shift, and very quickly they did—away from Israel.

So it's no surprise that, among Israel and its supporters, ambivalence now attaches to the 1947 UN vote. Yes, Britain had earlier betrayed the Balfour Declaration, just as the UN would betray the partition resolution. But Britain now has a prime minister, Theresa May, who has answered Palestinian and other calls for a "Balfour apology" with a resounding "absolutely not": "We are proud of our pioneering role in the creation of the state of Israel."

Of the states that voted for partition, by contrast, only the United States is prone to issuing comparable reassurances. Vice-President Mike Pence no doubt will express similar pride in the celebration scheduled to take place in New York this week, but that's ironic: Abba Eban, who led the Zionist effort at the UN in 1947, wrote that, after the vote, "I was disturbed by the weakness of American support," which had been "more lukewarm than the Soviet."

The second cause for reticence is the notion, echoed by Benny Morris in his response, that the partition resolution wasn't all that important anyway, so why bother? By 1947, the Jews in Palestine were 600,000-strong and unstoppable. Even with a resolution, Israel wound up fighting a war of independence, and it certainly would have fought one had the UN vote been deadlocked. It's a war Israel would have won. "In all likelihood," Morris concludes, "the state would have arisen, in 1948 or a year or two later, whatever the UN had decided or failed to decide in November 1947."

What-if questions are unanswerable, but I'm inclined to agree with Morris. Still, Abba Eban once gave a less confident answer:

> If the United Nations debate had ended in deadlock, . . . the strongest probability is that the country would have continued to live under international tutelage, with a joint American-British administration. And if the United Nations had asserted its sovereignty by proclaiming a UN trusteeship, it is unlikely that even President Truman and the Soviet Union would have extended recognition to a Jewish state established in revolt against an international jurisdiction. . . . I cannot construct any scenario for 1947-1948 in which a Jewish state, recognized by the major powers, could have emerged if there had not been Zionist victories at UNSCOP [the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine] and in the UN General Assembly.

If not, then what? Who knows? I'm reminded of a passage by Christopher Sykes, the British author of an influential work on Israel, who once asked what might have happened had there been no David Ben-Gurion. "Israel would probably have come into being nonetheless," he answered, "but it is hard to believe that the state would have been founded in so swift and firm a way, without far more of distress and ambiguity."

Absent a UN resolution or Ben-Gurion, the trauma of Israel's birth would have been exacerbated. Better to have had both. But for those who wish to emphasize Israel's birth as the result only of battlefield grit and sacrifice, there is a logical prejudice against celebrating the UN vote as a watershed.

Third, the other half of the UN resolution poses a problem for some Israelis and supporters of Israel: it recommended the establishment of an Arab state as well as a Jewish one. Indeed, in 1988, the Palestine National Council, while citing the partition resolution as precipitating a "historical injustice," added that "it is this resolution that still provides those conditions of international legitimacy that ensure the right of the Palestinian Arab people to sovereignty." It was a *partition* plan, and for Zionist opponents of partition today, it's nothing to celebrate. (The 1917 Balfour Declaration is much less complicated: it didn't even mention Arabs, and merely insisted that the "national home" of the Jewish people not prejudice "the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities.")

But even Israelis eager for partition might be less than eager to celebrate. This is because the partition plan came with a map—a division that would have left all of Jerusalem under international control, surrounded on all sides by the proposed Arab state. (It also would have cut the Jewish state into three chunks, linked at two points.) From the outset, the leaders of the yishuv bristled at the proposed borders, and especially at the exclusion of Jerusalem.

And so, beginning in the spring of 1948, when the Arabs went to war to throttle Israel, Israel seized the opportunity to occupy a good part of the territory allotted to the Arab state, and to push through a corridor to the besieged Jews in western Jerusalem. To justify its conquests, Israel insisted that the Arabs, by going to war, had nullified the partition plan—and its map. In 1949, Ben-Gurion declared the resolution "null and void," bereft of "any moral force." In 1956, he said: "[Just as] we cannot bring back all our dead sons and daughters who died in that war of independence, [so] that resolution cannot be brought back."

In this view, Israel didn't arise from the UN resolution, but emerged upon its death. Why then celebrate a dead letter—strangled at birth by the Arabs, and then buried by Israel?

For these three reasons (and perhaps others), relatively little attention, especially as compared with the festivities surrounding the Balfour centenary, is being paid to the 70th anniversary of the UN vote. This seems to me a missed opportunity.

Most obviously, the Balfour Declaration spoke only of a "national home" for the Jews, which the British later interpreted to be less than a state. Because of that vagueness, millions of Jews in Europe for whom the declaration was originally intended were prevented from immigrating there and did not survive the Holocaust. The 1947 UN resolution, by contrast, explicitly recommended a Jewish state, and at a moment when the yishuv had the strength to

leverage international recognition to maximum advantage.

But there is another compelling reason to emphasize the 1947 resolution, and to do so time and again. That reason: the Arabs rejected it. And because they did, preferring war, they cannot escape their share of responsibility for the war's consequences: their "catastrophe," or *nakba*.

Evasion of responsibility explains why the Palestinians, in telling the saga of their "dispossession," stress the Balfour Declaration and downplay the partition resolution. By claiming that the die was cast against them as early as 1917, their own mistakes in 1947 and 1948 are made to seem inconsequential.

This elision is facilitated by the fact that the Balfour Declaration is an easy target. There *was* something presumptuous in the way Britain made promises over Palestine in 1917. Yes, the Balfour Declaration had the backing of the major Allied powers, as I showed in an essay earlier this year in *Mosaic*. The Balfour Declaration could not have been more legitimate—by the standards of its time. But these are not the standards of our time.

The 1947 resolution, however, does meet today's standards. Prior to the vote, the General Assembly empowered UNSCOP, comprising representatives of eleven uninvolved member-states, to investigate the situation and make recommendations to the General Assembly. This is now standard procedure in the handling of conflicts, and it was here that the Palestinian Arabs made their first mistake—one that their apologists, to this day, seek to cover up.

If you believe Columbia professor Rashid Khalidi, you'll take it as fact that Palestinian Arabs "were either not consulted, or were effectively ignored by the various international efforts that culminated in this resolution." The UN "expert" Richard Falk makes the same claim: UNSCOP "never consulted the wishes of the Palestinian people or the residents of historic Palestine." "For me," Falk has said, the "fundamental flaw with the partition proposals contained in Resolution 181 was the failure to consult the people resident in Palestine at the time."

This is false and deceptive. The Palestinian Arab leaders *boycotted* UNSCOP, which was eager to meet with them. There was no UNSCOP "failure to consult the people," there was a Palestinian failure to engage UNSCOP. Henry Cattan, a Jerusalem jurist and advocate for the Palestinian cause, thought this decision "unfortunate," since it allowed the Zionists to present their arguments "without contradiction from the Arab side." But he couldn't get it reversed:

> When UNSCOP came to Palestine for its inquiry, its [Muslim] Indian member came to my house and, speaking as a friend, asked me to suggest to the [Palestinian] Arab Higher Committee that it was unwise for it to boycott UNSCOP and its investigations. I transmitted his view to the Arab Higher Committee but without result. Its attitude was adamant: there was no need for any inquiry or investigation, since the only course was to end the Mandate and to proclaim [Arab]

Palestine's independence.

Not only did the Arab Higher Committee then reject the majority report of UNSCOP, which recommended the partition of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states; it also rejected the *minority* report, which recommended a federated, binational state. In the Arab view, the Jews had no right to anything—not a single immigrant, not a shred of self-government. Once the Mandate ended, the Arabs believed they could set the clock back to 1917. Their leaders and thinkers, lost in a fog of wishful thinking, had no way to gauge the strength of the yishuv, which had gathered near-sovereign force under their very noses.

Their second mistake compounded the first. The Arabs misread the significance of the partition vote. Partition was adopted by a two-thirds majority vote in the General Assembly—not by a secret agreement, not by a great-power proclamation, but by an open vote of sovereign states. This is a procedure we have come to regard as fundamental to international legitimacy.

No less important, the two rising superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, drove the "yes" vote forward. This, despite the fact that the Soviets had been hostile to Zionism and supportive of the Arabs all through the 1920s and 1930s. The sudden Soviet turnabout showed how strongly the wind was now blowing against the Arabs. The voting procedure, and the identity of the yes-sayers, meant that the partition resolution had far greater political weight than the Balfour Declaration. (It's also why the international two-state consensus forged by it has lasted to this day.)

Yet the Arabs rejected the partition vote exactly as they had rejected the Balfour Declaration—not a partial rejection, but a total one. Why? Because they thought that once the British left, they would defeat the Jews. An example of this thinking is the testimony of the late Palestinian academic Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, a native of Jaffa, who left a telling account of the mood there on the eve of the war:

> The inhabitants of Jaffa in general believed—like most of their fellow Palestinians throughout the land—that the Palestinian was braver than the Jew and more capable of standing hardship. They thought that, as the country belonged to the Arabs, they were the ones who would defend their homeland with zeal and patriotism. . . . In short, there was a belief that the Jews were generally cowards.

This is why the Arabs refused to accept partition, or a federated state, or any plan that recognized any Jewish rights at all. Why concede anything to a motley mob of cowardly Jews? The people of Jaffa, Abu-Lughod went on to say, believed that "if they made ready a bit . . . then they were sure to emerge victorious."

Instead the Palestinians went down to an ignominious defeat, dragging the Arab states with them. Indeed, their conduct in the war conformed almost precisely to the conduct they had

expected of the Jews, making them contemptible in their own eyes and in the eyes of other Arabs.

It took more than 60 years for a Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, to describe Palestinian and Arab rejection of partition as a "mistake" (in an interview in 2011). But this was far from a full accounting. The outer limit of permissible Palestinian introspection is demonstrated by Hussein Ibish, the most moderate of Arab-Americans:

> It's virtually unimaginable that any national group could have demonstrated the foresight and determination to accept what necessarily seemed to them profoundly unjust, indefensible, and even, from their sincere point of view, actually rationally inexplicable. Palestinians obviously made a mistake, but, in all honesty, what community in its situation would ever have acted differently?

The answer to Ibish's question is simple. What community "would ever have acted differently?" The Zionist Jews who accepted partition, with all of its "indefensible" flaws, in 1947.

Which is why it is important to mark this 70th anniversary, and every anniversary to come. It isn't just a reminder of Israel's legitimacy; it's a reminder of Arab responsibility.

Benny Morris, Michael Mandelbaum, and Harvey Klehr, my three respondents, have made many fascinating points with which I'm in full agreement, and I'm also grateful for the generosity of their praise. On two particular points, my perspective differs.

I thank Michael Mandelbaum for finding the shared thread of my two *Mosaic* essays. He's quite right: it's hard to think of another state established in the 20th century with as many international endorsements as Israel. And he is also right that the story of Zionism belongs to the greater saga of national self-determination.

The pseudo-scholarly project of shoving Zionism into the despised category of "settler colonialism" rips Zionism from its actual historical context, the better to defame it. Objectively, however, Zionism wasn't colonialism (or socialism, for that matter), but a Jewish adaptation of 19th-century European nationalism. The Zionists were up to the same thing as other fresh converts to nationalism on Europe's borderlands, and later in all of Asia and Africa.

Any doubts about Zionism's nationalist DNA were put to rest in 1905, when the Zionist Congress rejected a proposal for a Jewish homeland in East Africa. Zionists didn't seek a place to exploit economically, or even a refuge for endangered Jews. They wanted back their native land, upon which the Jews once had lived as an independent nation—a land which, unlike Africa, could nurture the Jewish people back to nationhood.

But there is a caveat here. Zionism came late to the era of self-determination (and only a step ahead of the Arabs), and it didn't neatly fit its template. The reason: in 1917, the vast majority of the Jews who, it was hoped, would populate the Jewish polity resided, on average, 1,500 miles away from their ancestral land. They lived not in the Ottoman empire but in the Russian one, and very few of them had immediate plans to leave it for their "national home" in Palestine, then populated overwhelmingly by "native" Arabs.

Even Arthur James Balfour, the signatory of the Balfour Declaration, recognized that the Jewish case posed an awkward question. Critics of Zionism, he noted in 1920, argued that "if you apply that principle [of self-determination] logically and honestly, it is to the majority of the existing population of Palestine [i.e., the Arabs] that the future destinies of Palestine should be committed." Balfour even admitted that this argument had the merit of "technical ingenuity."

But he then dismissed it—since, to his mind, "the case of the Jews is absolutely exceptional, and must be treated by exceptional methods."

> The case of Jewry . . . falls outside all the ordinary rules and maxims, cannot be contained in a formula or explained in a sentence. The deep, underlying principle of self-determination really points to a Zionist policy, however little in its strict technical interpretation it may seem to favor it.

Arthur Koestler, for his part, did have a formula: he called it the "freak" aspect of Jewry. It was "unprecedented that a race should lose its country, and hence its physical nationhood, and yet preserve its identity through two millenniums"—and then, suddenly, awaken to "national consciousness and produce a modern political movement, like green shoots breaking from a petrified forest." Everything that followed was "freakish," including the Balfour Declaration ("dangerously outside the cautious routine of diplomacy"), and the gestation of Israel ("conceived on paper, blueprinted in the Mandate, hatched out in the diplomatic laboratory"). Only in its last phase did Israel conform to general precedent—born, like all nations, in violence ("the decisive factor").

It is precisely because Israel ill-conforms to the "technical interpretation" of self-determination, and was "hatched out in the diplomatic laboratory," that its legitimacy is subject to constant attacks in the diplomatic arena. Add to this the fact that for many of today's 193 member-states of the UN, Israel will always be in overdraft as long as there is no Palestinian state, however failed that state might prove to be. So a great deal is stacked against Israel, even before anti-Semitism is added to the ledger.

Is this "normal"? Koestler explained that "freak phenomena are merely the extreme extensions of normality." If so, then Israel is "normal," but it exists (indeed, even thrives) on the edge of the ledge.

Like Mandelbaum, I too hope that, in time, Israel will enjoy the same measure of legitimacy that accrues to all successful nations. To no small extent, it already does. But there is still a distance to cover. Hence the need to mark, if not celebrate, such occasions as the Balfour centenary and the anniversary of the partition vote.

Or does Israel's legitimacy perhaps rest not on the two millennia of Jewish perseverance, but on the sudden calamity of Holocaust? Benny Morris argues that the Holocaust, more than any other factor, explains why the General Assembly voted in favor of partition and a Jewish state. He believes that the resolution was a collective act of reparation inspired by the horrific images from the extermination camps, liberated by the Allies only a few years earlier.

His argument is elegantly expressed, but it's still speculative. It can't be proved or disproved. Certainly Zionist diplomats at the time didn't think that such sentiments stirred their foreign counterparts. Abba Eban, drawing on the Soviet instance, offered this generalization:

> The fact that Soviet support of our cause was based on self-interest rather than on benevolence was a positive factor in my eyes. My experience has told me that all nations determine their policies in the light of self-interest and then explain their policies in terms of self-sacrificial altruistic morality. Even the Soviet Union feels a need to idealize its self-interest by reference to liberal, Enlightenment values. Its objectives in 1947 were pragmatic, concrete, tactical, and strategic, but its justifications were formulated in terms of self-determination and equal national rights.

Morris also adduces the French vote in favor of partition as having been particularly determined by sympathy for the Jews. But Moshe Sharett, Israel's foreign-minister-in-waiting in 1947, thought otherwise:

> The approach of the French was cold and skeptical. . . . It was a very sober attitude, without enthusiasm, without the moral overtone displayed by other governments for whom the problem was politically less complicated and vexing. . . . Just as the French can be emotional and sentimental, they can also be cold and rational—and so they were in this case. . . . [France's UN ambassador Alexandre] Parodi wanted to be fair toward us, but a chill emanated from him: a chill we felt in our direct meetings with the French delegation, and in our meetings with all the great powers.

The French vote, third in importance to the American and Soviet, is worth a full study in its own right, and it looms large in two important books on the first decade of Franco-Israel relations, one (in Hebrew) by Benjamin Pinkus and another (in French and Hebrew) by Tsilla Hershco. The record compiled by them confirms Sharett's impressions, and adds still more

complications.

Thus, the French at various times gave refuge to Haj Amin al-Husseini, mufti of Jerusalem and Nazi collaborator; allowed the *Exodus* to sail from Marseilles with its cargo of Jewish survivors; and supplied the arms sent to the Irgun on the *Altalena*. But if one factor rose above all others in French calculations, it was a desire to administer a kick to Britain, which had kicked France out of Syria and Lebanon in May and June 1945. In October of that year, de Gaulle told a French Zionist: "The Jews in Palestine are the only ones capable of chasing the British out of the Middle East."

The Israeli historian Meir Zamir, who has documented the "secret war" that ensued between Britain and France, has concluded that "in the period 1945-1948, the most effective French weapon against Britain in the Middle East was its support for the struggle of the Zionist movement." If so, the French rationale more or less paralleled the Soviet one.

Still, France had other mitigating interests. That's why the French government held off until the last minute before deciding in favor of partition, and even tried to delay the vote. France finally voted "yes" mainly to fall in line with the Soviet-American consensus (this, according to the editors of the official *Documents diplomatiques français*).

Where does Holocaust-driven sympathy for the Jews figure in all of this? All one can say is that Zionist leaders didn't rely on it, and all of France's moves can be explained without it. Of course, 33 countries voted "yes," so the French case says nothing about the rest. But it would seem to confirm Eban's observation: states secretly make decisions based on interests, and openly rationalize them by invoking morality.

I learned much from Harvey Klehr's interesting account of how the Soviet position impacted the Palestine and (more particularly) the American Communist parties. I have nothing to add, but I do want to contribute a footnote to the story of support by Jewish Communists for a Jewish state.

Stalin's decision found one of them, Maxime Rodinson, in Beirut. He had joined the French Communist party in 1937, and he stayed in it until 1958. Rodinson became an important scholar of Islam and, after 1967, a famous critic of Israel. Most notably, he was one of the first to try to cram Israel into the "settler-colonialism" matrix.

But in 1947 and 1948, he supported the creation of Israel—because Stalin did.

> All of us Communists at that time had been conditioned to throw in our lot, without understanding, with everything Stalin decided, because it could only be in the higher interests of the World Revolution. . . . I was faithful to the Communist line [on support for Israel], but regarded it as a gesture that was necessary for the

moment.

Rodinson eventually departed the party (though not before defending Stalin over the infamous 1953 “Doctors’ Plot”), and ended up writing ideological tomes against Israel. (Its creation, he said, was “a historical mistake.”) But these condemnations had little lasting effect. In contrast, the support given by him and his “comrades” for Israel’s creation in 1947 rendered a crucial service to Zionism—not just “for the moment,” but for 70 years, and counting.

In October 1947, Chaim Weizmann put his finger on the most salient truth at the United Nations: “The main point is the positive attitude both of America and of Russia, and it is almost tantamount to a miracle that these two countries should have agreed on our problem.”

“Freakish” or “miraculous,” Soviet support for the birth of Israel was a crucial link in the chain of events that produced the Jewish state. And there is circumstantial evidence that it was a forced miracle: the result of tireless work by the founders of Israel. Perhaps by the 80th anniversary in 2027, or the centenary in 2047, we’ll know for certain. In the meantime, let us give provisional credit where provisional credit is due.